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Response to Lefever

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Response

Ilka Piepgras

I. Introduction

Some weeks ago, I asked a friend to critique my response to Dr. Lefever's paper. "Well," he said after reading my draft, "now I can really tell that you work for a former communist paper. You have been infiltrated by their ideas!" Be that as it may, Dr. Lefever's paper provoked me to take a more Eastern perspective than I usually do simply because the author's view is one-sided and, in my opinion, a bit arrogant with regard to the former communist countries.

In substance, Dr. Lefever argues that the new world order is actually not very new, that the world is still dangerous and conflicted, and that the perpetual struggle for power among human beings and nations goes on. He suggests that strong democracies like the United States should secure a balance of power within our fragile multistate system, and he says that only "a God-fearing society can achieve a measure of order, justice, and freedom in this world." In other words, the industrialized Western world, its power, and its values have defeated communism. Therefore, the victorious Western system should be implemented all over the world.

I do not think a crusade to Westernize the globe could make this world a better one. The model of a capitalistic society has proven to be more attractive than the socialist one, but is it, therefore, faultless? How receptive is the spoiled and drone consumer society of the West to sacrifices? Is it correct, as Dr. Lefever points out, that ideas alone, not economic reality, drive history?

I will try to answer these questions from a German perspective, but first I would like to mention something that, in my opinion, did not receive enough attention in Dr. Lefever's presentation.

II. The Condition of Eastern Europe

In most of the post-communist countries, the situation is still characterized by a mixture of breakdown, dissolution, and emptiness. The new democracies in the former USSR are far from stable. In Russia, to take the most striking example, a few newly rich families have emerged, but the majority of the people suffer from severe poverty as organized crime tightens its grip on cities and a significant portion of the economy. Many Russians live in fear and anger—an explosive mixture that, as some observers predict, might easily lead to a civil war.

Even in my hometown of Berlin, some thousand miles away from Moscow, I have witnessed these features of everyday Russian life. Last summer, for instance, an icon dealer from Moscow, with apparent links to the Russian mafia, was shot in his store in downtown Berlin, and a growing Russian community within my city tells about people who escape their plight at home by going westward. As in all countries where communism has collapsed, many Russians tend to glorify the past and look for any strong personality who pretends to have a solution to the disastrous situation. Furthermore, strong feelings of nationalism grow rapidly among those who survived a difficult economic situation under the communist regime and who now live in an even worse one. This is the perfect time for demagogues like Vladimir Zhirinovsky to seduce and mislead the people. Preaching revenge and promising a new imperial and greater Russia, he is putting balm on hurt Russian souls. He is appealing to those who feel deeply humiliated as the losers of the Cold War. Zhirinovsky might be too extreme to really take over leadership. Nevertheless, other less-known but equally dangerous characters are lining up to take advantage of the political and economic vacuum that followed the fall of communism.

There is no doubt in my mind that a stable, peaceful, democratic, and cooperative Russia is in the best interest of everyone. Economic growth and a certain level of prosperity are the premises of stability and peace. Therefore, the fundamental interest of the leading Western countries on their way into the twenty-first century must be to empathize with and assist the new democracies in the East as they struggle to make a successful transition to a viable post-communist political economy. This

will require more than the self-congratulation of Dr. Lefever's approach.

III. United Germany and the New World Order

Germany's role in this world-in-transition is relevant for a number of reasons, especially because it symbolizes many of the current uncertainties.

In its fourth year of reunification, Germany is still looking for a new identity internally and externally. Will the new Germany be principally a continuation of the old Federal Republic? Or, will it be a different country? Will it take a place at the head table of the new world politics? Or, will it continue to play second fiddle to the United States?

Following the reunification, Germany is experiencing all the difficulties of reconstructing a former communist country. Furthermore, the German nation is still "preoccupied with becoming a nation," as historian Timothy Garton Ash recently described in *Foreign Affairs*. Today's Germany is a conflict-ridden society with a deeply divided population—a country that, since the historical changes in 1989, has not yet found a lasting inner equilibrium.

On the international level, Germany is struggling for a new role that corresponds to its economic power, size, and social magnetism as well as to its special burdens of history. Hitler and Auschwitz are less than a lifetime away; therefore, the issue of enhancing its military presence in the world is a lively and tense discussion both within and around Germany.

During the Cold War, the confrontation of the superpowers saved Germany from defining a precise and, more important, active military policy. The Federal Republic lived comfortably under the security umbrella of NATO. This firm anchoring in the Western bloc provided much of its inner confidence and peace of mind, but having regained full sovereignty—the last Russian soldier left Germany in August 1994, the last allied one in September—the issue of its own security policy has gained importance.

In terms of a new foreign policy, Germany pays attention to its position within Central Europe and stresses its special relationship with the countries in Eastern Europe. The German

Defense Ministry clearly favors a rapid enlargement of NATO to include the country's eastern neighbors, and Germany is eager to ensure that, within ten years, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia enter the European Union (EU). Of course, this commitment grows out of a clear national interest. It is the threat of mass immigration that drives Germany to want to extend the EU eastward. A recent poll published by the EU shows, for example, that about 20 million people from Eastern Europe think constantly about emigration westward. Although there might be a lot of hysteria and exaggeration regarding the issue of mass immigration, there is little doubt that it profoundly determines German policymaking today. I want to speak about this for a moment because it tells much about the challenge toward a new and, hopefully, better world.

In general, we seem to be experiencing a contradiction in development: while the world's political and economic ties grow stronger and stronger and we even speak of a "global village" as a metaphor for integration, there is also a trend back to smaller units, to nations and regions. While the decision-makers are focusing on globalization, the people—I should say "voters"—are more and more concerned about the order in their own front yards. The weather forecast for one's hometown is getting more attention than national news, not to speak of international news.

This is partly why Germany presents a rather depressing picture today. It is as though the country has grown in bulk but contracted in spirit. There is not much left of the revolutionary élan of 1989. For many Germans, the story of reunification is a story of yet unfulfilled dreams and frustrated hopes. West Germans had secretly expected life to go on as before. They thought the constant spiral of affluence and stability would never stop. Instead, they had to face economic stagnation and cuts in their social services. East Germans believed the way out of the economic mess the communists had left behind would be a short one. Instead, they have to face mass unemployment for the first time in their lives. East Germany suffers from an unprecedented process of deindustrialization. To date, only about 20 percent of its industries have survived. In real figures, unemployment is at 40 percent, early retirement schemes and retraining included.

The precarious economic situation is one reason for a growth in xenophobia and violence, especially among the youth. This is spawned by a lack of direction and social envy as well as frustration and aggression.

Confronted with a Western arrogance, with a neocolonial attitude, and, moreover, with old and innate characteristics of capitalism such as competitiveness and performance pressure, many East Germans resort to a glorification of the past. The spirit of “nostalgia” is widespread in the former Democratic Republic. Nothing illustrates it better than the recent success of the small Party of Democratic Socialists (PDS), the very party that took over from the former Communist Party. This emerging rehabilitation was underscored by chasing one of Germany’s long established parties, the Liberal Democrats, out of several state parliaments. I am talking about nostalgia in Germany because the actual revival of the Communist Party shows what a decisive role economic justice and stability play in a world that is increasingly divided less by traditional politics and more by differences in economic development and privilege. Although the former Communist Party is responsible for much of the economic disaster in Eastern Germany, its successors are capitalizing on the current condition. If there were clear economic growth and prosperity in East Germany, if circumstances were drastically better, the Party would belong to the past regardless of its ideas or values.

This is why I strongly believe that material life and economic reality—not ideas—drive history, and this is, as you will have noticed, the point on which I fundamentally disagree with Ernest Lefever. Whenever great historical changes are made, the economic situation is the most critical feature, followed by ideas and personalities. For instance, when Hitler seized power in 1933, Germany had just experienced the Great Depression and suffered under massive economic instability. Unemployment was at its highest. When the communist dictatorship in East Germany was overthrown in late 1989, it was the disastrous economic situation that provoked the uprising of the people. Communism was not defeated by the values of capitalism but, rather, by its own shortcomings. The economic system had failed. Now, in the mid- and late 1990s, even the radical East German intellect Bärbel Bohley, who played a leading role in

those historical days of November 1989, now looks back upon the so-called revolution as the mere search for consumer goods. In Cuba, Fidel Castro faces the most serious threat of his order because the once carefully balanced black market system is out of control and the Cuban people suffer even more from acute shortages.

Peace and a better world after the Cold War deeply depend upon economic stability and justice within this world. Therefore, I want to stress the importance of generous financial investments and economic help, of transferring know-how and professional training from the industrialized West to the struggling new democracies in the East. We should discuss the role of international institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank with the same interest as we discuss the role of the United Nations these days.

IV. Conclusion

I want to end by making a reference to what Dr. Lefever describes as the "American Idea." As far as I understand, Dr. Lefever wants the United States to serve as the anchoring force in a global civil society and as a role model for the rest of the world. I truly admire the "American spirit," which represents for me a liberal, open-minded, and powerful society. However, I doubt whether what attracts others is enough to promote some sort of global order within the present disorder. Moreover, in my estimation, the United States is not as sound and stable as it used to be. Its internal problems are becoming more severe to such an extent that this is undermining America's confidence as well as dimming its reputation.

Having just had the privilege of traveling through the United States for more than three months, I was able to meet people from various social classes and communities. Oftentimes, I sensed dejection and defeat. Many said, "We used to solve problems in this country, but now we complain about them."

Years ago, refugees from Haiti or Cuba would not have been turned away. Today, even in this unique country of immigration, strangers are demonized and blamed for unemployment and crime. Such growing resentment has led the Clinton Administration to tighten entry into this country. In this regard,

the most striking example of a changing American spirit may be the "Save Our State" initiative in California. This proposed law is intended to exclude undocumented immigrants, including children, from publicly funded health, education, and social service programs. The initiative is being marketed with great success. A recent poll by the *Los Angeles Times* showed 62 percent of those surveyed in favor of it.

During my recent tour, I saw crack houses in Miami and read stories about an eleven-year-old alleged murderer from Chicago who was murdered himself by members of his street gang. I constantly heard people complain despairingly about growing crime rates and poverty. I was shocked by the contemporary form of racial segregation that forces certain ethnic groups to live in squalid and devastated neighborhoods while others, who can afford security, retreat into the comforts of wealthy suburbs. I was frightened by the enormous gap between rich and poor, especially in the big cities of this country, one of the richest in the world. With the echo of the Los Angeles riots in my mind, I wonder how long the apparently fragile social peace in the U.S. is going to last.

From my perspective, the failure of communism is not necessarily a victory for capitalism. The cruel social Darwinism of a society based on a free market and the notion that everybody is responsible for him- or herself is a serious threat to a peaceful world. Therefore, we have to accent the imperatives of social justice if the new world order is to be democratic and peaceful.

Communism is dead, but the dream of social equity and human solidarity must survive.